

I strongly believe seniors need a reliable prescription drug plan to help them cover the rising costs of medications. In August of 2003, seniors underscored this message in a series of town hall meetings I held throughout our communities. From Oak Harbor to Everett to Bellingham, seniors expressed their deep concerns about skyrocketing prescription drugs costs and the need for action on a prescription drug bill.

They also had another clear message: reject any bill that does not help.

After analyzing the proposed prescription drug bill, I concluded that it was bad medicine for seniors and a raw deal for Washington state.

First, the bill prevents seniors from purchasing affordable and safe medications from Canada, critical to seniors in the 2nd Congressional District that neighbors Canada. The average price of drugs in our communities is 140% higher than it is in Canada, yet the Bush administration is working to stop seniors from accessing safe and affordable medications from Canada. The pharmaceutical lobby is taking credit for killing this provision of the bill even though the Republicans and Democrats in the House earlier overwhelmingly voted to allow seniors to travel to Canada for safe and affordable drugs.

Second, this bill specifically prohibits negotiation for better drug prices for seniors. This prohibition leaves seniors to pay full prices instead of helping them with high drug costs. We already allow similar negotiation for veterans who get medications through the Department of Veterans Affairs. We even allowed the government to negotiate better prices for Cipro during the anthrax scare in 2001 when people's lives were at stake. In the end, this bill chooses to protect the pharmaceutical industry rather than seniors in my district.

Third, over 49,000 retirees in Washington are expected to lose their current employer-sponsored health coverage due to a lack of adequate incentives in the bill for employers to keep retirees on their plans, according to an Emory University study.

One of my top priorities is to ensure Medicare reimbursements to local hospitals and doctors are more fair so local seniors are treated on par with seniors around the country. Bill provisions, unrelated to the prescription drug benefit, did not address the fairness issue but do help local hospitals and doctors with the chronic problem of low reimbursement rates. In the last five months, I have voted nine times to increase Medicare funding for hospitals and doctors. My commitment to their assistance is clear.

When it comes to something as important as affordable prescription drugs for seniors, politics needs to take a back seat. It is interesting that groups like Citizens for a Sound Economy, the Heritage Foundation, and the Club for Growth, all identified with conservative voices in the country, agree with the AFL-CIO, Families USA and the National Committee to Preserve Social Security and Medicare that Congress should defeat this bill, while major drug companies want Congress to pass it.

If the current administration and Congressional leaders want to do the right thing, they would bring relief to health care access for seniors by immediately increasing hospital and doctor reimbursements and go back to the drawing board to develop a real bipartisan deal on a prescription drug benefit instead of the raw deal this bill brings.